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ABSTRACT

International and minority students often pose additional challenges due to cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic differences with the mostly white, middle class, highly educated (and predominantly female) public service librarians with whom they come into contact. Such differences can range from minor speech/articulation problems to major comprehension failures. Knowledge of the likely areas where miscommunication may arise, such as language, culture, and socio-economics, would allow modification of the standard styles and techniques used, in order to increase the liklihood of a successful outcome for all parties. Listening carefully, speaking slowly and clearly, and being patient are a few ways to handle language problems. Awareness of the educational hierarchies and differences in library resources in other cultures can help librarians to assist international patrons. Finally, librarians can use bibliographic instruction courses to bring minority students up-to-date on library resources and procedures, and can make these students feel welcome in the library and the university by expanding their collection of books and journals that deal with minority issues or are written by minority authors. (PRA)

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SERVING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND MINORITY STUDENTS AT THE SMALL COLLEGE LIBRARY: A LIBRARIANS VIEW

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SERVING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND MINORITY STUDENTS AT THE SMALL COLLEGE LIBRARY: A LIBRARIANS VIEW

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International and minority students often pose additional challenges due to cultural, linquistic, or socio-economic differences with the mostly white, middle class, highly educated, (and predominantly female) public service librarians with whom they come into contact. Such differences can range from minor speech/articulation problems to major comprehension failures. Knowledge of the likely areas where miscommunication may arise would allow modification of the standard styles and techniques used, in order to increase the liklihood of a successful outcome for all parties. This presentation will attempt to identify and illustrate some examples of the kinds of problems encountered and explore possible alterations or adjustments to overcome the initial obstacle.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians, particularly college librarians, have traditionally prided themselves on their efforts to provide non-biased services and materials to patrons basically on demand. Like almost every other facet of modern life though, this is becoming more difficult to achieve; not because librarians are unwilling or unable to change with the times, but because the times are getting more complex. The homogeneity of campuses has been decreasing for some time and will without doubt continue to diminish significantly. Librarians need to adapt their historic openness and receptivity to accomodate shifting demographic patterns on their campuses.

What this paper will attempt to do is present a few typical examples of what public service librarians may encounter when dealing with international and minority students, and to suggest possible treatment or solution options.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXAMPLES

1. Language Problems

a. The most obvious linquistic problem facing librarians is the varying degrees of familiarity with English as a Second Language (ESL) possessed by the international students they are trying to serve. Unfortunately there is a close correlation between the patrons ability to articulate the information need they want to fill and the probability they will get what they want. For example,

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an individual with poor ESL skills may present a question in the form of half-completed sentences that include a few of the keywords describing what they want. Since verbs and adjectives are important to indicate actions and relationships but are also difficult to master, the librarian must sometimes engage in a kind of interview format, patiently trying to discover the actual need.
There is a distinct similarity to the "reference interview", with the additional handicap of langauge barriers.

The only realistic solution to this problem is to listen as carefully as possible, speak slowly and clearly, use common or familiar words, and be patient. Let the student do as much explaining as they can and then try to complete the request as best one can, seeking feedback cues about how successfully the process may be going.

b. Another language related problem that can cause real trouble for librarians is the occasional request to explain or interpret an assignment. Faculty sometimes let their creativity overwhelm their normal good sense and as a result, can design assignments that are hard even for American students to understand. In such cases things can be especially confusing for an international student. Because there may be a reluctance to seek clarification at the source (see 2. a. below) they can appear in front of the librarian asking for help in figuring out what the instructor wants.

This is a difficult dilemma for librarians. On the one hand they are conditioned to try their best to answer the questions presented to them. On the other hand, if the assignment really is complex, the correct explanation may not even be possible based on what the student has in hand. Important pieces may have been given verbally in class and are exactly the part the patron doesn't understand or didn't get in the first place. The best course to follow is probably to reject any efforts at cryptography unless it it is patently obvious what the response should be. Any attempt to interpret or guess can result, if wrong, in very unpleasant complications. One method of dealing with this is to suggest an individual in such a situation consult with the professor personally before doing anything else.

2. Cultural Problems

a. Asian cultures differ significantly from the American one in which the international students suddenly find themselves. There is a much higher appreciation for education in general and much greater respect for educators (and librarians get included in this group) specifically. The status accorded teachers may make Asian students seem shy or reticent about approaching library staff compared to their American peers. Most American librarians encourage an easy informality in their patrons hoping to eliminate or at least reduce any perceived anxiety about asking for help. This friendliness may seem unusual to some Asian students who are used to strictly heirarchical educational systems. Sometimes they may be so eager to keep things harmonious they will smile and nod, as if in agreement, when in reality they may either not comprehend, or not be getting exactly what they want.

b. International students from many countries, often including the highly industrialized nations, may not be aware of the size and complexity of library resources, even at a small college. What is taken as matter of course by some, of the American students, (e.g. knowledge of classification systems, alternative approaches to research topics, automation and electronic technologies) is totally unfamiliar territory to most or nearly all of the international students. All first time college students will probably need a good, basic bibliographic instruction period, but the American students are less likely to be surprised at the level of sophistication it is possible (and maybe even necessary) to attain.

A corrolary to the preceding discusion is that many times the efficiency, speed, and/or quality of services or resouces is taken for granted making it difficult to explain errors, delays, or other unfortunate but occasional problems. This is usually more embarrassing than serious, but nevertheless needs to be explained in an understandable and truthful manner, with options or suggestions offered if applicable.

Librarians who wish to assist these patrons effectively should keep in mind these and other similar cultural characteristics when interacting with international students.

MINORITY STUDENT EXAMPLES

Providing library services to minority students presents somewhat different challenges than are usually the case with international students. The main difference is that language is not normally a significant factor. Also, in the place of "cultural" differences it is perhaps somewhat more accurate to speak of possible "socio-economic" differences.

It may be appropriate to note the sensitivity currently surrounding the issues of gender and race in general and the importance of maintaining a professional, impartial, consistantly high quality level of service for all patrons.

1. Language problems

a. To the extent this is a problem, it is likely to arise more from a dialect or non-standard English usage that middle-class, white, female librarians (the largest single personnel category in academic libraries) have not been exposed to. With minority recruitment gaining momentum however, this could assume more importance as greater numbers of urban African-Americans and other ethnic and racial groups not previously present in any great numbers on many campuses arrive at colleges more accustomed to a "traditional" student body composition.

When dealing with this situation it is important to get to a common uderstanding without unintentionally reflecting a personal judgement on the superiority of one's own patterns or habits.

2. Socio-economic Problems

a. There is a likelihood that some minority students, based on their high school background, will be assigned to a study skills or other learning development program to help overcome gaps in their preparation. A carefully constructed bibliographic instruction effort, co-ordinated with the director of the program, can be a useful method of getting these students to feel more comfortable with library resources and librarians.

b. The dominance of a white, middle-class culture on campus may make minorities feel left out or adrift from any connection with their own heritage. Libraries can help mitigate this somewhat by acquiring popular print and non-print materials that provide a connection to that missing element. For instance the library might ask for suggestions about new journal subscriptions that minority students might enjoy as casual reading. Creating or expanding a minority author special collection is another possibility. This can have the added benefit of making the library seem a less threatening place that sincerely wants to help minorities succeed personally and academically.

CONCLUSIONS

Assisting international and minority library patrons effectively is largely a matter of perceiving differences from a "standard" model and adjusting interactions as those differences may dictate. Specially designed bibliographic instruction courses offer an opportunity not only to address specific needs but also to reveal libraries and librarians as helpful, friendly, and sympathetic toward all patrons, regardless of background.

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